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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001194

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: BANGLADESH NATIONALIST PARTY ASKS FOR DELAY IN  
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

REF: A. DHAKA 1182  
[1](#)B. DHAKA 1173  
[1](#)C. DHAKA 1175

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Geeta Pasi. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and  
(d)

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) demand on November 18 for a delay in December 18 Parliamentary elections intensified the nation's already super-heated political brinkmanship. The party demanded that within 48 hours the government lift the State of Emergency, reign in Election Commission powers to disqualify candidates, and delay Parliamentary and upazilla (county) elections. The BNP's arch-rival, Awami League, has voiced similar demands except on the issue of Parliamentary elections, which it has insisted take place as scheduled December 18. Confidants to BNP Chairwoman Khaleda Zia told EmbOffs she would agree to elections anytime after December 27 although she has yet to mention a specific date. Our message to political contacts is that the election must be held by the end of the year in accordance with the Caretaker Government road map for the return to democracy outlined in summer 2007.

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THE BNP MAKES SOME CONCESSIONS ...  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) BNP Chairwoman Khaleda Zia unveiled her four-point ultimatum after meeting with leaders of her party and alliance partners. The BNP dropped several previous demands for participating in elections, including the withdrawal of "false" corruption cases against leaders of the BNP and its political allies, and the release of people detained on political grounds. Importantly, Zia advisers said the BNP dropped its insistence that the government lift the State of Emergency before the deadline for nominating Parliamentary candidates. In effect, the BNP has accepted that its many leaders convicted of graft under the Caretaker Government would not be eligible to run. The BNP security adviser Major General (retired) Akbar told PolEcon Counselor he and others had convinced Zia to concede the issue to show the party was serious about ridding itself of tainted politicians. The party did not drop its demands to push back by a month local elections scheduled for December 28 and to repeal Election Commission powers to unilaterally disqualify Parliamentary candidates. The Awami League has made similar demands.

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...BUT ISSUES A NEW CALL TO DELAY ELECTIONS  
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13. (C) The one new BNP demand was to delay the Parliamentary elections until the return of all Bangladeshis who go on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Amid conflicting accounts of when the last pilgrims would return, Zia adviser Shafik Rehman told PolOff she understood the cut-off date to be December 27. Rehman said the BNP would prefer the elections be in January but would agree to a date as early as December 28. Abdur Razzak, the Assistant Secretary General of BNP alliance partner Jamaat-e-Islami, said he believed the Awami League and BNP could reach an agreement to hold elections at the end of December (between December 28-31) in accordance with the Caretaker Government's road map for a return to democracy. Jamaat is eager to participate in elections but may not be willing to campaign if the BNP decides to boycott.

14. (C) Tying the delay to the Hajj appeared to be an attempt to win popular approval for an election postponement by appealing to religious sensibilities. The real reason for seeking delay almost assuredly had nothing to do with the Hajj. The more likely reason was the BNP's difficulty in meeting the November 20 deadline for nominating candidates to run for Parliament. Zia also was likely trying to wring every possible concession out of the Caretaker Government and Awami League as a display of her political power. She clearly left room for compromise: she neither explicitly threatened to boycott if differences remained after 48 hours nor did she propose a specific date for elections.

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15. (C) Shafik said the ball was in the court of the Caretaker Government and the Awami League to respond. He said Education Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman, who is leading negotiations with the political parties over the elections, was positive about the new BNP position. (Note: Caretaker Government Advisers are akin to ministers. End note) There were no immediate signs, however, that the Awami League would support a delay in the vote. Sheikh Hasina's Special Assistant Hasan Mahmud told reporters on November 18 the election could not be pushed back for even a day. Still, Awami League Publicity Secretary Asaduzzaman Noor told Polecon Counselor that reform-minded party leaders were urging Sheikh Hasina to show flexibility.

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INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ROLE  
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16. (C) The Embassy is consulting with other Missions to ensure a continued strong international chorus in support of the Caretaker Government's road map. Ambassador Moriarty met November 18 with Pakistan High Commissioner Alamgir Bashir Khan Babar, who repeatedly urged the vote be delayed by up to a month to ensure BNP participation. The call for a delay appeared to be a message from Khaleda Zia, whom the High Commissioner recently visited. In response, the Ambassador emphasized the need to adhere to the Caretaker Government's road map.

17. (C) The Pakistan High Commissioner, who arrived in Bangladesh in August 2005, said he believed Khaleda Zia had changed more than Sheikh Hasina during the two years of Caretaker Government rule. (Note: The two former prime ministers were jailed on corruption charges. Sheikh Hasina lived abroad from June-November 2008 on medical parole while Khaleda Zia was released on bail in early September. End note.) Alamgir said Zia confided in him that she no longer knew whom to trust, adding that she had acknowledged mistakes made by her 2001-2006 government.

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COMMENT: NO TIME FOR WEAK HEARTS  
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18. (C) Post has long anticipated political brinkmanship between Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, whose mutual hatred is legendary, up to the final hours before elections. The BNP ultimatum included some positive developments. It dropped some earlier demands and it did not insist on moving the election to 2009, which would violate the Caretaker Government's long-standing timetable. Although some Zia confidants suggest in private that she now is willing to adhere to the road map for elections by year's end, she has yet to say so publicly. The lack of trust between the two parties remains the biggest roadblock to reaching common ground to ensure a successful and sustainable return to democracy for this moderate Muslim-majority country of 150 million people.  
Moriarty